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# Brief Sketch of "Life and Work"

OF

*Rev. James Evans*

(INVENTOR OF THE CREE SYLLABICS)

BY THE

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OF CANADA



## Foreword

Within the compass of this little booklet Dr. Maclean has given us in outline the life story of a great man.

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A creative personality was James Evans of Norway House. Traveller and author, patriot and pioneer, teacher and inventor, he was first and last a Christian missionary. In the Great Lone Land, while the new West was yet only a dream, he wrote his name into Canadian history and won a place among the great missionary figures of all time.

The memory of such a man becomes a national heritage and a national trust. No people can afford to forget its heroes. The Church or Nation that neglects a noble past does not deserve a worthy future. Citizens of Manitoba and Methodists across Canada do well to plan a fitting memorial to James Evans of Norway House. Anyone responsive to the thrill and glow inspired by noble deeds will not wish to withhold support.

But, however honored in the Capital of a Province, the subject of this sketch will still be remembered as Evans of Norway House. At that important Post, in the summer of 1914, I met an Indian centenarian whose proudest boast was that he had been among those who welcomed James Evans on his arrival in 1840. And for generations to come that name will be loved and honoured in the Northland, wherever his dusky brethren hallow their temporary camp by singing the songs of Zion and reading in their own language the story of the wonderful works of God. So shall it be "so long as grass grows or rivers run."

JESSE H. ARNUP.

Methodist Mission Rooms,  
Toronto

# James Evans

Inventor of the Syllabic System of the Cree  
Indians in Northwestern Canada

1801—1846

By Rev. John Maclean.

James Evans was born in Kingston-upon-Hull, England, in 1801. He had a great liking for the sea, his father being Captain of the troopship "Triton," with whom as a youth he made two voyages as a common sailor, the experience becoming helpful to him in after life. Entering commercial life he gained a wider knowledge of the world, and when he was converted under the preaching of Gideon Ousley, the famous Irish Evangelist, he began preaching in the towns and villages in the vicinity of his home. About 1821 the Evans family emigrated to Canada, settling at Lachute in the Province of Quebec, followed by James in 1823. He taught school near L'Original, was married to Miss Mary Blithe Smith, and moved west to Upper Canada. In 1828 he became teacher of an Indian school at Rice Lake, and having genius in the study of languages he mastered the Ojibway tongue and made translations of portions of the Bible and hymns. Finding it difficult to enable the Indians to read in their own language by the use of the Roman alphabet, he sought a simpler method of teaching them. While at Rice Lake he translated eighteen chapters of Genesis, and twenty Psalms, and prepared a vocabulary of the Ojibway language.

In 1831 he was sent as missionary to the Credit Indians; in 1833 he was ordained and stationed at St. Catharines, and in 1834 he was sent to Sarnia to labor among the Indians on the St. Clair River. By a critical study of the Ojibway, he discovered that eight consonants and four vowels would

represent the whole language, and he sought to express all the words by means of a syllabic system. On June 11th, 1841, he wrote to the Rev. Joseph Stinson: "For this purpose I prepared a syllabic alphabet such as I presented to the Bible Society in Toronto in 1836, and of which they disapproved."

In 1837, he spent four months in New York, superintending the printing of his translations, including his "Speller and Interpreter in Indian and English," a Hymn Book in Ojibway and some music. From 1838 until 1840, he labored among the Indians on Lake Superior, and in the latter year work was begun among the Indians of the Northwest. In the spring of 1840, four missionaries were sent and stationed as follows: Robert Terrill Rundle at Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House, William Mason at Rainy Lake and Fort Alexander, George Barnley at Mose Factory and Abitibi, and James Evans at Norway House.

In the first week of August, 1840, he arrived at Norway House, as General Superintendent of the Northwest Indian Missions. His first winter was spent at the Hudson Bay Company's fort, studying the Cree language, and in the following spring he located his mission about two miles from Norway House fort, naming it Rossville, in honor of Donald Ross, Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, and living at Norway House. He went into the forest, and with the help of the natives, secured materials and erected a neat church, parsonage and school, and twenty houses for the Indians, and thus laid the foundation of a prosperous village. As he was a good teacher and musician, he taught the children reading, writing and arithmetic, and trained them to sing the hymns he had translated into the Cree language.

In June, 1841, less than a year after his arrival in the country, he had so far perfected his Cree Syllabics that he writes: "The men, women and children at Norway House write and read it with

ease and fluency, as do some European gentlemen who speak the language of the Indians in different parts."

His first books in the Cree Syllabic were made with leaves of birch bark, on which the characters were written with ink made from the soot of the chimney. After numerous experiments and difficulties he cast type from lead taken from tea chests, and in the spring of 1841 he made a font of type, and with an old jackpress used for packing furs he printed five thousand pages, and bound one hundred copies of a small volume of hymns of sixteen pages. A printing press and type were afterward sent to him from London, England, and the work of providing literature for the natives was begun. The influence of the new learning spread far and wide among the Indians. The Chippewyans secured some of the books and learned to read them, and the Cree Indians used the syllabic characters in writing letters to their friends.

So simple is the system that less than fifty characters cover the whole of the Cree language. A white man can master them in an hour, and an intelligent Cree can use them readily in a week in reading any book. These syllabics have become the basis of other syllabaries. From them Archdeacon Macdonald of the Anglican Church prepared a syllabic system in the Tukudh language and the Rev. Father Morice, in 1885, invented a syllabary for the natives of Stuart Lake. He says: "Based on the syllabic principle first adopted by the Rev. James Evans, a Protestant Clergyman, it materially differed therefrom. While expressing faithfully the sounds of the Denes' very complex language, which are more than three times as numerous as those of the Cree dialect for which Evans' syllabary was devised, its component parts were modelled and grouped in such a way that their value was easily identified. In fact, Indians are known to have learned to read in two evenings by the use of this system."

Following Evans' syllabics, Rev. John MacLean devised a syllabary of the Blackfoot language, which has been superseded by one invented by an Anglican Missionary among the Blood Indians, a copy of which is in my possession, but the author's name has slipped from my memory.

Evans' syllabics are in use by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Missionaries, and an extensive literature has developed, including Hymn Books, Prayer Books, Pilgrim's Progress and other books, catechisms and tracts. The Bible in Swampy Cree was published in 1861, and in plain Cree in 1920. The Lord's Day Alliance of Canada issued a proclamation in the Cree syllabics on the observance of the Sabbath, and the Dominion Forestry Department had a similar document in relation to forest fires. A phonetic system has been invented for the Chinese language by which it is possible to learn to read in two weeks.

The life of James Evans, by the writer, has been out of print for some years, but an enlarged biography is now in course of preparation.

Dr. Ephraim Evans, brother of James Evans, writes: "You know his great success in the invention of the characters in which the Cree language is now written and printed. I was in England in 1841, when a set of his home-made types was received by the Wesleyan Missionary Society, and took some part with them in obtaining permission from the Directors of the Hudson's Bay Company to have a font cast, and, with a press, sent out to Norway House, pledges being given that they would be used only for mission work.

When the syllabic characters were explained to Lord Dufferin, Governor General of Canada, by the Rev. E. R. Young, he said: "Why, Mr. Young, what a blessing to humanity is the man who invented that alphabet. I profess to be a kind of literary man myself, and try to keep up my reading of what is going on, but I never heard of

this before. The fact is, the nation has given many a man a title, and a pension, and then a resting-place and a monument in Westminster Abbey, who never did half so much for his fellow-creatures."

Miss Tucker, better known as "A.L.O.E.," in her book, "The Rainbow of the North," says: "During the Bishop's stay at York Fort four Indians applied for baptism. Two of them resided on the spot. They were half-brothers, and it appeared that one of them, who went by the name of John, had four years before visited Norway House, where he heard the gospel preached by one of the Wesleyan Missionaries. Anxious to know more, he procured a copy of the Cree alphabet, of which he soon made himself master. He then obtained a Catechism in the same language, which, with indefatigable perseverance, and by embracing every opportunity of help from others, he learned to read. He communicated his knowledge to his brother Joseph, whose heart also was touched, and they were now both of them candidates for admission into the visible church." In a footnote the authoress adds: "These were but rare, as the Alphabet and Catechism were in peculiar characters, invented by the late Mr. Evans, a Wesleyan Missionary."

John McLean, author of "Twenty-five Years' Service in the Hudson's Bay Territory," published in London, in 1849, says that James Evans "with his pen-knife, cut the types, and formed the letters from musket-bullets. He constructed a rude sort of press, and, aided by Mrs. Evans as compositor, he at length succeeded in printing prayers and hymns, and passages of Scripture for the use of the Indians."

Lord Southesk, in his book on "Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains," says: "Our Stoney messenger met us on the road, bringing me a letter from his people, written in the Cree syllabic characters. It was translated to me as follows:



'We thank God for sending us such a great man. We send our compliments to him. We will receive him as a brother.'"

R. M. Ballantyne, in his book, "Hudson Bay," says: "In fine weather I used to visit my friend Mr. Evans, at Rossville, where I had always a hearty welcome. . . . I spent a pleasant afternoon in sauntering about the village, and in admiring the rapidity and ease with which the Indians could read and write the Indian language by means of a Syllabic Alphabet invented by their clergyman. The same gentleman afterwards made a set of leaden types, with no other instrument than a pen-knife, and printed a great many hymns in the Indian language."

James Evans died suddenly at Keilby, Lincolnshire, England, on November 23rd, 1846, aged 45 years, and the Minutes of the British Conference of 1847 says: "James Evans was a missionary of remarkable ability and zeal, and of great usefulness among the North American Indians. His success among the aborigines of Canada led to his appointment as General Superintendent of the recently formed missions in Hudson's Bay Territory. To his mental vigor and indomitable perseverance the Indians are indebted for many advantages. Among these is a written and printed character, suited to their language, of which Mr. Evans was the inventor."

James Evans was one of Canada's great men, a notable missionary, and one of the pathfinders of the Northwest, and is therefore worthy of remembrance.

Last year the Secretary of the Geographic Board of Canada wrote to the Mission rooms for evidence to verify his belief that books printed by James Evans in the Cree Syllabics of his own invention represented the earliest printing done in the area covered by the present Province of Manitoba. The evidence was not far to seek. In the library vault at Victoria College were copies of the little deerskin-covered books containing hymns and

scripture texts, and bearing the imprint, Norway House, 1841. With strange emotion one handled and read an original letter in the handwriting of James Evans, under date of Upper Fort Garry, Forks of the Assiniboine River, June 11th, 1841. It tells of the wonderful discovery of the Syllabic System, "adequate to writing every language from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains." Almost equally amazing is an incidental account of apostolic travels accomplished or in prospect. He plans "to leave in September for Cumberland, Carlton, Fort Pitt, Edmonton, Jasper's House and Fort Assiniboine by water and thence proceed by snow to Rocky Mountain House, Fort Dunvegan, Fort Vermilion to Slave Lake, Athabasca, Fort Chipewyan, Ile a Croix and back to Norway House in July, 1842, if God preserve my life—a short tour of about six thousand miles."